

'Palm Latitudes' author views life through global window

By ELLEN MALINO JAMES
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Kate Braverman — the Los Angeles poet and novelist who reads Lorca, Neruda and Paz in Spanish, who prefers, she said, the writers of this hemisphere like Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez — phoned with the news that "people from wildly different cultures are being Latinized! You see, I told you. There is something in the air."

She has just seen a special issue of Time magazine about Hispanics breaking out of the barrio. It comes only a week after the publication of her new novel, "Palm Latitudes" (Simon & Schuster; \$19.95) and seems to validate her own use of Latin-American imagery and themes.

Braverman, who is not Hispanic, discovered Hispanic Los Angeles more than five years ago when she moved to Echo Park from Venice to escape high rents.

"It was like living in a third world, a foreign city," she recently told an audience at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference.

"Palm Latitudes" is a book, she explained, about women's lives and about "latitudes of the sensibilities that are not mere geography." It is also a tropical vision, sensuous and lush, of Los Angeles itself.

At lunch the following week, Braverman mused over the impression she had made on several women at the Santa Barbara conference. One told Braverman that she didn't look like a poet. Another said she found it difficult to imagine someone like Braverman living in the barrio.

"What is a poet supposed to look like?" asked Braverman, who indeed looked as chic and elegant as any of the ladies lunching that day.

Punk period remembered

Now 39, she recalled her punk-rock period of a decade ago when she would read her poetry at Whisky a Go Go: "I was doing performance art then — before it had a name."

Perhaps she is thinking of what the character Francisca in "Palm Latitudes" said: "It is my imagination that has created me." Braverman replied, "I was thinking about myself and the women I know. Our imaginations have created all of us. We're nothing like we thought we were going to be . . . The greatest story of this century is what's happening to women."

Braverman came of age when the feminist movement was just getting under way in the 1970s. It was a time when women's writing

was first being taken seriously, she said.

"I've talked about sisterhood, but I did not have a concept of what it was until I had a daughter," she said. Braverman dedicated "Palm Latitudes" to her daughter Gabrielle, now 6.

The book, she explained, is about the alienation of women who live apart from the dominant culture and also apart from men.

"What I came to understand by writing 'Palm Latitudes,'" Braverman noted, "is that we all live in these latitudes whether we're Latin or not . . . That this is increasingly a culture where we're all one paycheck away from being homeless."

"'Palm Latitudes' is the story of the many and what they would say if they could," said Braverman.

The protagonists Francisca Ramos, Gloria Hernandez and Marta Ortega with her daughters Angelina and Orquida are not meant to be literal portraits of the neighbors Braverman came to know in Echo Park. "No," said Braverman, "these are mythical archetypal figures. . . 'Palm Latitudes' is more a metaphorical biography than my first novel, 'Lithium for Medea' (1979), which was more directly autobiographical."

"But," she added, "there is never any simple translation from fact to fiction . . . Your art works on shaping the material into something else."

It would not occur to Braverman to show the novel to any of her former neighbors in the barrio, nor does she identify with the burgeoning movement of Latin women writers.

It is not politics but aesthetics that interests her: "People think that if you write about something important and significant like Managua, that will somehow make your work good. It's not the story but the telling of it . . . One can write about anything at all. The right set of words can alter the orbit of the world . . . For instance, I'm now living in Beverly Hills and writing interlocking short stories about that environment. You can write about going to Gucci's and having an anxiety attack, and it can be brilliant."

Braverman's parents never opposed her ambition to be a writer and a poet "because I had so much success so quickly." In her early teens, she took a UCLA Extension course with Robert Kirsch. She attended poetry workshops and, as she described it, "One day the walls fell down and a poem just appeared on the page. It was like a gift . . . My poems were almost immediately recognized, and I was published

early in my 20s in places like the Paris Review."

Then came a series of setbacks from which she has not yet recovered.

"I have not found publishing to be a remotely logical experience," Braverman remarked as she recounted how she was "at a loss to understand why Harper and Row made up their minds that 'Lithium for Medea' was going to fail even though it was well-received by critics. It was very bizarre. The book was neither distributed nor advertised."

Then, after completing "Palm Latitudes" in 1983, Braverman experienced an "inordinate struggle" to find another publisher.

"After repeated rejections, I really felt I was losing my mind when I could not find a publisher nor get any positive feedback from friends and colleagues for 3½ years. It was definitely a humbling experience that Hunter Thompson would call 'forced consciousness-raising.'"

Braverman retreated to California State University, Sonoma, in 1985 to get a master's degree. She continued to write poetry, which Illuminati Press published last year ("Hurricane Warnings").

At Sonoma she found solace and support from a couple of teachers and scholars who encouraged her to push on with her campaign to see "Palm Latitudes" published. Eventually, an editor at Simon & Schuster accepted the manuscript.

Meanwhile, Braverman completed the first draft of a new novel, a contemporary story "far more minimalist" than her current novel. Not surprisingly, she

now seeks to find another college environment where she might work as a writer in residence.

She continues to give fiction and poetry workshops at UCLA Extension, which resumes Sept. 25.

Braverman is pleased so far by the early reviews for her new novel and feedback from friends.

She continues to experience the isolation and loneliness she believes to be more acute in Los Angeles than in New York: "Writers here, feeling inferior to (writers in) New York, practice a form of self-loathing. The Venice poets have disintegrated . . . We have lost the sense of community and excitement . . . Of course, one advantage of being snubbed by the East Coast is that the climate is more open to experiment, because no one is paying attention anyway!"

Nevertheless, she still yearns for a "community of artists like the Bohemian environment we had in the 1970s, except now everyone would have money!"

Ellen Malino James is a Los Angeles writer and oral historian.



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